



**Testimony to the Appropriations Committee
Susan Murphy
Executive Director
Liberty Bank Foundation
March 1, 2011**

Thank you for this opportunity to testify on behalf of the **Commission on Children**.

My name is Susan Murphy and I am the executive director of the Liberty Bank Foundation. The mission of the Liberty Bank Foundation is to support preventive programs that assist low- and moderate-income residents of Liberty Bank's market area in achieving their personal goals and reaching their potential. In particular, the Foundation directs its grantmaking toward programs for families and children. We see the Commission on Children as a valuable partner in developing and implementing preventive programming for families throughout our service area.

Supporting the Commission on Children

Our Foundation has partnered with the Commission on Children on several initiatives and has provided grant funding to the Commission on two occasions. We provided a grant in 2008 to support the Commission's "Kids for Connecticut" campaign to improve the quality of life for children by educating parents about prevention in the areas of healthcare and education. In 2009, we made another grant to the Commission to support its outreach efforts to make residents of the Groton area more aware of the availability of Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Employment and Training benefits, and the eligibility requirements of the program.

Recently, we have worked with the Commission on Children on developing a bridge fund for low-income families in times when the state's unemployment rate is 8% or higher.

We have also worked with the Commission on Children on expanding the Parent Leadership Training Institute and Parents Seeking Education Excellence.

At the Foundation's 2010 annual meeting, the Commission's Executive Director, Elaine Zimmerman, provided a presentation on the effects of the recent recession on children, and the efforts of the Commission to help families climb out of poverty.

Regarding our work in coordination with the Commission on exploring a bridge fund for low-income families:

In early 2010, the Connecticut General Assembly passed Substitute House Bill No. 5360; Public Act No. 10-133; An Act Concerning Children in the Recession. Section 10 of this Act called for research into the establishment of a Loan/Bridge Fund to support families in crisis due to the effects of the recession in the areas of housing, utilities, hunger, and unemployment. In fall 2010, the Connecticut Commission on Children and the Liberty Bank Foundation convened a group of community stakeholders to address this issue. The stakeholders included social service agencies; philanthropy; United Way 2-1-1 Infoline; governmental agencies; and advocacy organizations.

During the committee's discussions, it became apparent that other issues relating to existing federal/state assistance programs need to be addressed in order for the proposed fund to function properly as a resource of last resort. These issues include maximizing the usage and funding of existing federal/state programs that support families and children in need, and streamlining the process for accessing these programs to meet the urgent needs of families in crisis. Without taking these steps first, it would be difficult or impossible to leverage additional dollars from private philanthropy, the business community, and individual donors to establish the fund.

The Key Findings of the committee are:

1. **State government agency response time reduction.** Service response time of agencies, such as the Department of Social Services (DSS), needs to be minimized in order to address the crises that families are experiencing in a timely fashion.
2. **Presumptive Eligibility:** Community agencies previously had the ability to determine client eligibility. If this were re-implemented, it would expedite the process, allowing families to receive benefits more quickly and prevent their situations from worsening.
3. **Point of Entry Coordination.** By utilizing tools such as the 2-1-1 Navigator (which determines eligibility for an array of federal/state programs), the application process could be expedited. This would also allow families to receive services and information in a "one stop" location instead of having to call or visit multiple agencies.
4. **Case Management Simplification.** After families enter the service delivery point of entry, their case management should be centralized in one access site, if possible, to address their needs.
5. **Public Information and Intentional Marketing.** Although the recession has caused an increase in food instability in the state, many people are not aware of their eligibility for federal/state programs. A targeted, culturally-sensitive marketing campaign would help those in need to become aware of available resources.

6. **Unmet Necessities Fund:** A fund to support families experiencing a financial crisis (housing, utilities, hunger, and unemployment) could be created with funds from private philanthropy, the business community, individual donors, and public monies. This would be a time-limited, fully-accountable, case-management-accessed fund that would be activated only when the Connecticut state unemployment rate rises above 8%. For many families, their need is due to a one-time event, and a small grant between \$200-\$1,500 can avert a more profound crisis that can lead to homelessness. The fund would need to be administered by a nonprofit organization.

Regarding the expansion of the Parent Leadership Training Institute (PLTI) and Parents Seeking Educational Excellence (PSEE):

Research studies show a clear linkage between student achievement and family involvement. Students whose parents are involved in their education are more likely to have higher grades and test scores, attend school regularly, pass their classes and be promoted, have fewer discipline problems, and graduate and pursue higher education.

Given the research findings, the Commission on Children developed the Parent Leadership Training Institute (PLTI) that gives parents the knowledge and tools to get involved as change agents in their communities and schools. In conjunction with the Center for School Change, the Commission developed Parents Supporting Educational Excellence (Parents SEE), a program that provides parents with the knowledge, skills and tools they need to partner with schools to improve education.

These are programs that the Foundation has funded numerous times in the past on a local level, but many of them terminated over the past couple of years as state funding for them was removed. The Foundation worked with the Commission to reach out to stakeholders in New London, Willimantic, and Norwich, and as a result, PLTI and ParentSEE are now restarting in those communities. We have provided seed money for two of these programs, with a grant request pending for the third. The Foundation is also considering a grant request from the Commission to fund its coordination of these programs throughout Liberty's service area.

Given the work conducted statewide by the Commission on Children to explore and offer potential policy solutions to family poverty, we invited Ms. Zimmerman to make a presentation at the Foundation's 2010 Annual Meeting. Ms. Zimmerman described the many negative affects that the recent recession has had on children and families, and the efforts of the Legislature and the Commission to support families struggling with job losses, foreclosure, and other economic hardships. She displayed a profound understanding of the issues facing families in our state, as well as strategies that could be employed to address them.

In sum, then, the Liberty Bank Foundation sees the Commission on Children as a key agency in coordinating our state's support for children and families.